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PAPAL SHOOTING PROBE

Italian Here to Study Alleged Bulgaria Link

By Robert J. McCartney
Washington Post Foreign Service

Within days after Mehmet Ali Agca shot Pope John Paul II last year, Italian police said they were convinced that someone had supplied the Turkish gunman with money and other support in the months before the attempted assassination.

In the 16 months since then, however, the inquiry into who was behind Agca has advanced slowly, and there are signs that some of the governments involved would be content if the case languished.

Only one person has been arrested as a suspected accomplice in the shooting, a Turkish youth described as a far-rightist who is charged with passing Agca the gun used in the attack.

Results have been so skimpy that the Italian chief investigator in the case, Ilario Martella, flew into Washington yesterday in hope of evaluating two recent U.S. media reports suggesting that Soviet Bloc intelligence agencies were involved. Martella made clear in a recent conversation in Rome that there was no hard evidence to prove East Bloc involvement, but he said last night in a brief talk on the telephone from his motel near the Pentagon that he could not rule out the possibility.

The major reason for the lackluster progress is the extreme difficulty in uncovering the tracks of Agca, a self-proclaimed "international terrorist" who visited a half-dozen or more countries in the 17 months before the shooting and traveled in the murky world of Turkish neofascist youths living abroad.

Another reason, however, is the lack of a coordinated, international inquiry. Martella indicated in Rome that cooperation from other countries has been uneven, and a U.S. intelligence source said that there had not been much "visible" evidence of international coordination. The U.S. official said that several countries have not been particularly open in providing details about the case, because it could expose them to criticism over their handling of terrorism or could cause diplomatic strains with the Soviets.

Reports last month by NBC-TV and Reader's Digest suggested that the Bulgarian secret service masterminded the shooting on behalf of the Kremlin because of Soviet irritation over John Paul's support for the independent union Solidarity in his native Poland.

In interviews with correspondents for The Washington Post in Italy, Turkey, Switzerland and the United States, officials said that nobody except the Soviets appeared to have had an interest in shooting the pope. Vatican sources and some U.S. intelligence analysts following the case have said that grounds exist to suspect a Soviet connection.

But there are wide gaps in the chain of circumstantial evidence that would link Agca to the Kremlin, and the formal inquiry still is in its early stages, according to the correspondents' reports.

"Conducting an investigation is like building a house," Investigating Magistrate Martella told special correspondent Sari Gilbert in his Rome office. "You have to finish the foundation before you can start thinking about the roof."

Martella acknowledged that a Turkish crime boss named Abuzer Ugurlu—who was named by the media reports as a key link between Agca and the Bulgarians—was "certainly of interest to the case." The magistrate flew to Turkey to question the "godfather," currently in a prison near Istanbul awaiting trial, where Ugurlu denied any involvement in the attack on the pope.

The media reports contended that Agca had received help before he shot the pope from associates of Ugurlu, who in turn was closely involved with the Bulgarian secret service. The reports maintained that any involvement by the Bulgarian secret service would point to Soviet complicity because Bulgaria is one of the most loyal Soviet satellites and the KGB is said to control the Bulgarian intelligence network.

Turkish intelligence documents also stated that Ugurlu worked closely with the Bulgarian secret service in his smuggling of arms, narcotics and other contraband. The Bulgarians have supplied arms to both far-left and far-right terrorists in Turkey in an apparent effort to promote civil strife and destabilize the NATO country, officials say.

The thesis that the KGB was behind the shooting assumes that the Soviets and Bulgarians worked hand in hand with Ugurlu's crime syndicate and that it in turn was involved with a network of far-right Turkish youths in Western Europe.

Martella declined to say whether he yet suspected any links among Agca, Ugurlu and the Bulgarians and Soviets, adding that he would comment only if he had proof of involvement. He indicated that there was nothing solid to prove at least two of the alleged links between Agca and associates of Ugurlu.